

Snow Shovel Safety

Our images of snow gently falling are mixed with thoughts of outdoor tasks, such as snow shoveling and snow blowing. By following some simple safety precautions, cold weather tasks can be accomplished injury-free.



Shoveling your driveway can be a strenuous workout

Every winter people hurt themselves shoveling snow, ranging from minor aches and pulled muscles to fatal heart attacks.

What people often fail to realize is that shoveling is more than just a chore. It puts a lot of stress on the body in a short period of time. Shoveling snow is like picking up weights, it's a lot of work. Cold weather, without any physical exertion, puts additional strain on your heart. So if you're older or out of shape, there's much more of a chance of hurting yourself by shoveling. Even people who regularly exercise can find shoveling to be strenuous if they try to tackle the job quickly without taking breaks.

"One of the biggest problems we have is to get it done all at one time. Do it in short stints. Divide up the area, do one then take a break.

Some signs you should stop shoveling are shortness of breath, heavy sweating or any kind of pain.

"Anything that's not normal is a warning sign. Shoveling causes a quick increase in the heart rate and blood pressure.

Who should think twice about shoveling snow?



Those most at risk for a heart attack include:

- Anyone who has already had a heart attack.
- Individuals with a history of heart disease.
- Those with high blood pressure or high cholesterol levels.
- Smokers.
- Individuals leading a sedentary lifestyle.



If you fear you're unable to tackle this tiring task, look into spending a few bucks and having a neighborhood kid shovel after a storm; or having a contractor plow it when heavy snow falls. It's probably money well spent.

"Back injuries are among the most common injuries resulting from snow shoveling. Stretching first is always a good idea. If possible, wait until later in the day to start shoveling. Many back injuries occur in the morning, because the tissue around the spine is not warmed up or loose after a night of rest. Ironically, people between the ages of 20 and 50 are more likely than older individuals to injure their backs, because they may not be aware that they are out of condition. Older people with back problems should never attempt to shovel snow. An older person has a greater risk of slipping on ice or snow and breaking a wrist, hip, arm or leg.

Here are some shoveling tips to prevent back injury and strain:

Be heart healthy and back friendly while shoveling this winter with these tips:

- If you are inactive and have a history of heart trouble, talk to your doctor before you take on the task of shoveling snow.
- Avoid caffeine or nicotine before beginning. These are stimulants, which may increase your heart rate and cause your blood vessels to constrict. This places extra stress on the heart.
- Drink plenty of water. Dehydration is just as big an issue in cold winter months as it is in the summer.
- Dress in several layers so you can remove a layer as needed.
- Warm up your muscles before shoveling, by walking for a few minutes or marching in place. Stretch the muscles in your arms and legs, because warm muscles will work more efficiently and be less likely to be injured.
- Pick the right shovel for you. A smaller blade will require you to lift less snow, putting less strain on your body.
- Begin shoveling slowly to avoid placing a sudden demand on your heart. Pace yourself and take breaks as needed.
- Protect your back from injury by lifting correctly.
- Stand with your feet about hip width for balance and keep the shovel



close to your body. Bend from the knees (not the back) and tighten your stomach muscles as you lift the snow. Avoid twisting movements. If you need to move the snow to one side reposition your feet to face the direction the snow will be going. Scoop in a forward motion, and step in the direction you throw the snow.



Snow shoveling is extremely hard work. Do not shovel snow unless you are in good physical condition.

Should you rush out and buy a snow blower?



Not necessarily. Not everyone who shovels snow is going to have a heart attack. Snow shoveling can be good exercise when performed correctly and with safety in mind.

Also consider back safety when shoveling snow. Even if you exercise regularly and are not at risk for heart disease, shoveling improperly could lead to a strained back. If you've been inactive for months and have certain risk factors, use some common sense before taking on the task of snow shoveling.

"Not taking proper precautions **while using a snow blower** is another leading cause of injury during the winter season," JoAnn Nora said. The following steps will help you avoid injury while using a snow blower:

- -Make sure to read the owners manual thoroughly before operating the snow blower.
- -Keep both feet firmly on the ground while starting the snow blower.
- -Remove obstacles from your path, and aim the snow carefully. If rocks or chunks of ice are thrown by the snow blower, they may cause injuries or damage property.
- -Do not unclog the snow blower chute while the engine is running.
- -Do not wear loose-fitting clothing, such as a scarf, that may get caught in the snowblower.
- -Do not drink alcoholic beverages while operating the snow blower. Alcohol may dull your sense of fatigue and cause you to overwork.
- -Do not operate the blower over gravel, loose stones or on steep hills to avoid losing control and causing injuries.
- -Know how to shut the machine off quickly.
- -Never leave your snow blower running and unattended.

Remember, as with any outdoor activity, dress properly for the weather. Wear several layers of lightweight clothing, and cover your head. Fifty percent of body heat is lost through the head.



Different snow shovels

